

CD 2007--6

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO FACULTY OF MUSIC



2006-2007 SEASON

WHERE GREAT MINDS MEET GREAT MUSIC

Friday, February 2, 2007
7:30 pm. MacMillan Theatre

University of Toronto Faculty of Music
Presents

University of Toronto Symphony Orchestra
Raffi Armenian, conductor

PROGRAM

Antonín Dvořák
1841-1904

Othello Overture, Op. 93

Oliver Balaburski, graduate student conductor

Jean Sibelius
1865-1957

Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47

Allegro moderato
Adagio di molto
Allegro, ma non tanto

Jennifer Banks, violin

INTERMISSION

Robert Schumann
1810-1856

Symphony No. 1 in B-flat major, Op. 38 "Spring"

Andante un poco maestoso - Allegro molto vivace
Larghetto
Scherzo. Molto Vivace
Allegro animato e grazioso

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Program Notes

Overture "Othello," Op. 93

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841-1904)

Adapting Shakespeare to music became a near-obsession among nineteenth-century composers. Mendelssohn's Overture "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is perhaps the most famous example but the line-up includes works by Berlioz, Schumann, Liszt, Smetana, Tchaikovsky and Verdi. Dvořák's 1892 overture, inspired by the great tragedy *Othello*, thus follows in a long tradition.

In an ambitious attempt to illustrate the entire drama, Dvořák pencilled in eleven plot references into the autograph (removed before publication). Cast in sonata form, a design well-suited to a struggle between opposing forces, the overture, however, focuses on the doomed lovers, leaving Iago's evil machinations out of the equation. Othello is represented by a four-note descending motif first heard in the *Lento* introduction and reprised at the start of the *Allegro con brio*. It is a noble and grandiose theme. The virtuous Desdemona, by contrast, is portrayed in a lyrical second subject introduced by the oboe. Towards the end of the exposition, the two lovers "embrace in silent ecstasy" (Dvořák's first reference in the autograph), set to a major-seventh chord. But in the development, "jealousy and rage begin to grow in the mind of Othello," and in the recapitulation, "Othello murders her at the height of his anger."

Woven into the musical fabric is another theme with a sighing quality first heard in the flute and clarinet in the introduction. (A sinister version later resurfaces in the muted horns.) Just what this theme is supposed to represent isn't clear (perhaps the force of jealousy?) but it serves its musical purpose well. Although here a subsidiary theme, it is actually the principal theme of an earlier concert overture, "In Nature's Realm," that Dvořák originally conceived as the first of a triptych, "Othello" being the last and his

popular "Carnival" overture the second, the three unified by the "Nature" theme.

It is tempting to philosophize about the meaning of the "Nature" theme since it appears in three overtures of very different character. But could Dvořák have simply been motivated by its contrapuntal possibilities in different contexts? If so, the implausible reduction of one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies to a concert overture of modest dimensions need not concern the listener. As Roger Fiske observes, Dvořák was "at the heart an 'absolute' composer like his idol Brahms." The overture may have more to do with the powerful emotions evoked in Shakespeare's play than with its plot.

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Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47

JEAN SIBELIUS (1865-1957)

At the turn of the last century, Russia tightened its grip on Finland, an autonomous Duchy within its empire. An 1899 decree allowed the Czar to bypass the Finnish Constitution and directly enact legislation. Further measures, such as the 1901 Conscription Act that forced young Finns to serve in the Russian army, only intensified the already growing nationalist movement. In a climate of civil disobedience and the rise of a radical opposition, the Czar-appointed Governor-General Bobrikov was assassinated in Helsinki in 1904.

It was against this political backdrop that Sibelius composed his violin concerto. Already admired as Finland's leading composer, he was not just revered as a symphonist (he had completed two) but was also known as a musical nationalist through works such as *Kullervo* and *Finlandia*. But unlike the symphonic poem, the romantic violin concerto had no

tradition of nationalism; nor did Sibelius attempt to write a "Finnish" concerto by borrowing Finnish folk tunes. Nevertheless, Finnish folk elements are present in his violin concerto by the combined effect of the use of modes other than major and minor, especially Dorian, (the mode of the opening theme); repeated notes at the end of phrases; themes confined to an interval of a fifth; and dactylic rhythms (long-short-short, e.g. in the finale). One writer has even detected Finnish speech patterns, both of rhythm and intonation, in the musical texture.

Many critics have described the concerto's opening as "soaring." It is without doubt one of the most inspired beginnings in the genre: over shimmering measured tremolos in the violins, the soloist introduces the main theme straight off, reminiscent of the Mendelssohn violin concerto with which Sibelius was intimately familiar having played it himself. Another feature it shares with the Mendelssohn is the structural importance given to the cadenza. Mendelssohn's stroke of genius was to place it at the end of the development, its tail serving to accompany the return of the main theme in the orchestra. Sibelius's formal manoeuvre is even bolder: the cadenza *alone* serves as the development section. The omission of the orchestral development is convincing because the virtuosos elements—double-stops, broken chords, etc.—emerge organically from the concerto's themes and are not just there for display. The cadenza really is the development.

The concerto's slow second movement is a gorgeous meditation coloured by the composers's trademark rhythmic suppleness created by subtle cross-rhythms. And if the first movement depicts a bird soaring over Finland, the finale is, as Donald Tovey approvingly puts it, a "polonaise for polar bears." Growling bassoons and alternating 6/8 and 3/4 time make for a memorable romp in the snow.

It is easy to imagine that the fluency of the concerto was created in a single breath of inspiration. But in fact its birth

was painful. Premiered prematurely in 1904 by a soloist not quite up to the task, the leading critic of the day, Karl Flodin, who was otherwise a Sibelius supporter, sharply criticized what he perceived as "technical overload" for the soloist and heavy-handed orchestration.

The criticism evidently resonated with Sibelius—he subsequently withdrew the concerto to revise it. The revised version was premiered the following year, in 1905, by Karel Halíř and the Berlin Orchestra conducted by Richard Strauss. Flodin may have been right the first time, but his stubborn disapproval of the revision is at odds with its subsequent reception history: a hundred years later, Sibelius's violin concerto has become the most frequently recorded in the twentieth-century repertoire, much loved by virtuosos and audiences alike. - R.R.

Symphony No. 1 in B-flat major, Op. 38, "Spring"

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810-1856)

Schumann sketched his first symphony in just four days in January 1841 and finished the orchestration a month later. Subtitled "Spring," the symphony was premiered at the Leipzig Gewandhaus in March led by the composer's friend and colleague, Mendelssohn. Conceived in the dead of winter, its first performance anticipated the season of renewal that inspired it.

According to Clara Schumann, the initial impulse for the work came from the last line of a poem about spring by Adolf Böttger, "Im Tale blüht der Frühling auf!" (In the valley spring bursts forth!), the spirit and rhythm of which directly informs the opening horn and trumpet "call to awaken," as the composer later characterizes it in a letter to a conductor.

The slow *Andante un poco maestoso* that accelerates into an *Allegro molto vivace* is a traditional symphonic device that suits the spring metaphor well. Schumann speaks of the "growing green

of everything, even of a butterfly flying up, and in the following *Allegro* of the "gradual assembling of all that belongs to Spring." The propulsive first theme, the object of vigorous contrapuntal development (in which even the triangle takes part), is complemented in the coda by the insertion of a slow chorale-like theme, an "unexpected lyrical parenthesis" according to Gerald Abraham—another application of traditional symphonic technique to the narrative of renewal.

The *Larghetto*'s atmosphere is warm and lush, and features gorgeous solos for the cellos and horns. In the coda, Schumann again surprises, also with a chorale theme, but uttered pianissimo and by the trombones, a gesture that oddly enough foreshadows the ensuing robust Scherzo theme.

The Scherzo, marked *Molto vivace*, bursts forth with fresh energy. Its claim to formal novelty lies in its inclusion of two different Trios, an elaboration of the obligatory repeats of the single Trios in Beethoven's Fourth and Seventh symphonies. The coda dissolves with, as Tovey puts it, a "mysterious fleeting vision of the first trio."

The finale, an *Allegro animato e grazioso*, is cheerful and vibrant, its principal theme—in Tovey's ever-colourful language—"as slight as a daisy-chain (and why not?)" While the first movement's development focuses exclusively on its first theme, here the development is dominated by the rhythm of the rising scalar second theme. "Changes occur with the swiftness of a kaleidoscope," remarks Abraham, and the piece swirls to a joyful conclusion.

At the time of the symphony's composition, Schumann was already a highly regarded composer of songs and short piano pieces. But awed by Beethoven's legacy, he held the large-scale forms in even greater esteem, and believed that any good composer should work in all genres. To a great extent self-taught, he thus set about the close study of the symphony, particularly Beethoven's symphonies, movements of which he reduced and transcribed for piano following the age-old technique of intimately getting to know a composition. The "Spring" symphony was his first substantial foray into what he considered the most sublime of all genres. - R.R.

Biographies

Maestro **Raffi Armenian** graduated from the piano performance class of Bruno Seidlhofer at the Academy of Music in Vienna, Austria. He further studied at Imperial College, University of London, England, before completing his studies at the Vienna Academy of Music with Hans Swarowsky (orchestral conducting), Rheinhold Schmid (choral conducting) and Alfred Uhl (composition). He also took private voice lessons with Ferdinand Grossmann.

In 1969 Raffi Armenian immigrated to Canada, where he became Artistic Director of the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony for 22 years. The Raffi Armenian Theatre in Kitchener, which he helped to design, is considered one of the best performance spaces in

North America, both for its acoustics and its design features. In 1974, as Music Director of the Stratford Festival, he founded the Canadian Chamber Ensemble, which achieved international recognition with tours in North and South America, and Europe.

Raffi Armenian has guest conducted all of the major orchestras in Canada, as well as in Belgium, Italy, the United States, and the Jeunesses Musicales World Youth Orchestra. Equally at home on the operatic podium, he has conducted productions in Toronto, Montreal, Detroit, Columbus and Indiana, in a vast repertoire, including Berg's *Wozzeck* for the Canadian Opera Company, Toronto, and Stravinsky's *Rake's Progress*. From 1982 to 1985 he was Artistic Director of

the Opera Studio of Opera de Montreal. In 1989, he conducted the final public appearance of the great Canadian tenor Jon Vickers, in a concert performance of Wagner's *Parsifal*. In March 2006, he led the University of Toronto Opera Division in four performances of *The Marriage of Figaro* by Mozart.

Raffi Armenian's work has received countless honors including the Canadian Grand Prix du Disque for *Serenades*, and an Emmy Award nomination for the TV performance of Menotti's *The Medium* starring Maureen Forrester. Woody Allen used his CD *Music from Berlin in the 1920s* as background music for his film *Shadows and Fog*. He is a recipient of Honorary Doctorates from the University of Waterloo and Wilfrid Laurier University, and the Golden Jubilee Medal of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. In 1989 he was invested into the Order of Canada.

Raffi Armenian has long been active as a pedagogue. In 1981 he became a Professor of the Orchestral Conducting Class in addition to conducting the Orchestra at the Conservatoire de Musique in Montreal, a position he continues to hold. In 1997 he accepted a two-year post as Visiting Guest Professor at the Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst, in Graz, Austria, and since September 1999 Mr. Armenian has been Director of Orchestral Studies at the University of Toronto.

Jennifer Banks started playing the violin at the age of four and completed her performance degree at the University of Toronto Faculty of Music on an exchange

program from the University of Otago, New Zealand. In 2005 she was a violinist in the Amygdala Quartet – the resident graduate string quartet at the New Zealand School of Music, concertizing around New Zealand and the South Pacific. She played in the New Zealand Youth Orchestra for 4 years as well as being a list member of the Southern Sinfonia and the leader of the Marama Chamber Orchestra. Jennifer has soloed with the Southern Sinfonia, the Wellington Youth Orchestra and the Central Otago Orchestra. She is a winner of both the University of Toronto and New Zealand School of Music concerto competitions. She was a finalist in the New Zealand Young Performer of the Year, placed fourth in the National Concerto Competition in 2003, and received the Ida White Award for the most outstanding performance student at the University of Otago in 2004. Jennifer has played in masterclasses for Shlomo Mintz and Charles Castleman and had lessons with David Takeno, Alice Waten (Australian National Academy), Peter Oundjian and David Harrington (Kronos Quartet). She studied with Annalee Patipatanikoon at the University of Toronto, where she won the Felix Galimir Chamber Music Award with her group, the JAG Trio, in 2005-2006.

Jennifer is also a keen violist, guitarist and singer and recently toured Europe and Russia with the award-winning Tower New Zealand Youth Choir conducted by Karen Grylls.

Jennifer is currently enrolled in the Masters program at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, Massachusetts.



Upcoming concert featuring the University of Toronto
Symphony Orchestra and Choirs

Friday, March 30, 2007

Agnes Grossmann, guest conductor

Bruckner: Te Deum

Mahler: Symphony No. 1

7:30 pm. MacMillan Theatre. \$18, \$10 senior/student

University of Toronto Symphony Orchestra

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Mark Johnston,
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Joyce Kim
Aleksandra Labinska
Michelle Lee
Jane Levitt
Aviva Lufer
Markus Medri
Takayo Noguchi
Livia Papadimitri
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principal
Matthew Chan
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